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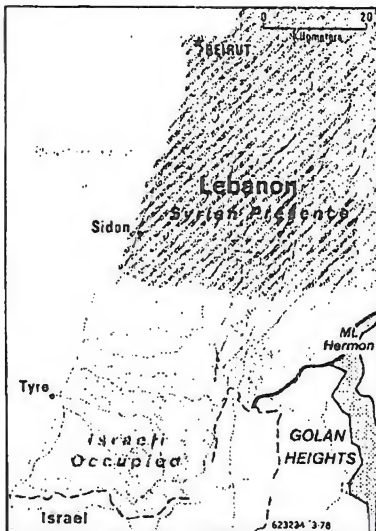
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Middle East

ISRAEL-LEBANON

Israeli forces took control of a larger chunk of southern Lebanon during the past week and the UN embarked on a new peacekeeping venture there. The Israelis reluctantly agreed to the introduction of the force, but are probably not confident it will accomplish their goal of keeping Palestinian commandos well away from the region, thereby enhancing the security of northern Israel. The Arab states remain embittered by the Israeli incursion, but, as usual, the divisions among them have precluded any significant countermoves on their part.

Last weekend, Israeli troops that had crossed into Lebanon a few days earlier to establish a narrow security belt north of Israel's border began expanding their offensive operations with a view to clearing Palestinian forces from the entire area south of the Litani River. After three days this goal was largely accomplished and the Israelis unilaterally declared a cease-fire. The Palestinians' area of free military



Israeli soldiers look across the Litani River during the ceasefire

movement is now limited to a relatively narrow belt north of the river; Syrian troops are in control of the rest of the country.

Israeli leaders at first explained their move to the Litani as a response to continued shelling of Israeli border settlements from areas outside the initial security belt. On 22 March, however, General Gur, the chief of staff, acknowledged publicly that the move was influenced by the momentum which developed at the UN last week to establish a UN buffer force. He indicated that the Israelis wanted the peacekeeping troops, if they had to come, to supervise the widest possible area south of the river.

Gur has stated that the Israeli units will be pulled out of southern Lebanon quickly once the UN force—authorized by a Security Council resolution adopted on 19 March that also calls for the withdrawal of Israeli troops—is in place. The first contingents of the 4,000-man UN group, contributed by France, Iran, and Sweden, began arriving in southern Lebanon on 22 March, but the full buildup will take some time.

Yasir Arafat's Fatah organization, which was quick to claim responsibility for

the 11 March terrorist raid that triggered the Israeli invasion, will now try to capitalize on Israel's action. The Palestinians acquitted themselves reasonably well in escaping from a much stronger Israeli force, a point Arafat and his colleagues will emphasize in approaching Arab donors for more aid. Fatah and other Palestinian groups almost certainly intend to conduct more terrorist operations within Israel.

Impact of Peace Initiative

Arab leaders from the most moderate to the most radical are unanimous in believing that the Fatah raid and the Israeli move into Lebanon have killed—or at least frozen—Egyptian President Sadat's peace initiative. The evident unwillingness of Israeli Prime Minister Begin during his talks in Washington this week to budge from earlier positions reinforced the Arab leaders' view.

Sadat himself may not be ready to write off the peace talks, but he clearly is trying to broaden his options if there is an irretrievable breakdown. As one element in its policy review, Cairo is almost certainly considering the advisability of new overtures to Moscow, a course a number of Sadat's advisers have been

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pressing for some time. Sadat was quoted in the 12 March edition of the authoritative Egyptian weekly *October* as saying that he would welcome an improvement in Egyptian-Soviet relations based on "mutual respect."

Meanwhile, the Egyptians hoped to ease their estrangement from the rest of the Arab world by emphasizing their solidarity with the other Arabs in condemning the Israeli action in Lebanon. Most Egyptian leaders believe Israel deliberately created the situation in southern Lebanon to relieve US pressure on Begin during his Washington visit.

Arab Reconciliation

Saudi Arabia and the small Persian Gulf states have announced their support for a special Arab League meeting on Lebanon. The Saudis would like now to promote a reconciliation between Sadat and Syrian President Asad.

Asad is not yet willing to mend fences with Sadat, however, nor to part company with the more radical regimes of Algeria, Libya, and South Yemen in denouncing the Egyptian peace initiative. Foreign ministers of the four countries, meeting in Damascus earlier this week, rejected the

idea of any Arab summit that would include Sadat. Syria may nonetheless consider attending a summit if and when Sadat indicates his initiative has failed.

Reactions in Israel

The Fatah terrorist raid and Israel's strong riposte muted the criticism Begin had begun to receive at home for allegedly mishandling Israeli relations with the US and the peace negotiations with Egypt. Dissension within the cabinet over policy on Jewish settlements and other sensitive issues quickly faded. Nearly all the country's political parties rallied behind the government, and the public overwhelmingly supported the strong measures in Lebanon.

Indications that Begin's talks in Washington did not go well have, however, caused fresh misgivings in Israel. The initial Israeli press reaction was almost unanimous in depicting the US-Israeli relations as in crisis and in pointing to the need for a reassessment of Israeli policy. There was, predictably, less agreement on whom to blame. As Begin headed home, it was clear he faced hard questions there on how his government plans to proceed



Two Palestinian guerrillas relax in Lebanon

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